

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

A recovered old Newsletter

Announcing the 1998 Conference: "Inventing Reality"

From the Steering Committee

On Saturday 14 February the Committee gathered in Wellington for a full day meeting. After dealing with a small amount of general business the remainder of the day was devoted to planning the 1998 Conference. We were all delighted with the progress which has been made so far and we can assure you that this year's conference will continue the very high standard that we have all come to expect from Sea of Faith conferences.

This year the conference is based at the Central Institute of Technology in Upper Hutt and will take place from 9-11 October. **There will be a limit of 200 places for this Conference – a limitation that has been accepted by the Committee in order to utilise the superb lecture theatre at C.I.T.**

Following on the successful introduction of a conference theme last year, the theme for 1998 is **"Inventing Reality"** – a theme that has great potential for interesting elective lectures and workshops topics. Two of the three keynote speakers have already been confirmed – Professor John Bishop of the Philosophy Department of Auckland University and Dr. Fernando, psychiatrist. The Committee are actively pursuing the third speaker (a woman).

The Steering Committee always take cognisance of the evaluation forms of the previous conference and with the strong recommendations of these will continue the innovations of last year – **core groups and elective lectures** – and there will also be two opportunities for workshops and less pressure on the Saturday programme. All this is possible by starting the Conference

early on the Friday afternoon.

In this newsletter there is an invitation to offer to run a workshop for this conference – I would encourage you to consider this. Do note that the presenter of a workshop is expected to spend only about 10 minutes introducing the topic and then the remainder of the time is given over to discussion by the whole group. Workshops are not mini-lectures and therefore with this format in mind the idea of offering to run a workshop on the theme Inventing Reality may not seem so daunting. Its always good to have offers of workshops from those who haven't previously run one.

I do hope that you are planning to attend the 1998 Conference and would encourage you to register as soon as the registration forms are sent out in order to be assured of a place.

Jane Griffith, Chairperson

From the Conference Coordinator:

'Same Campus: Different Facilities'

Yes, this year's conference is being held again at the CIT campus, Heretaunga with its lovely park-like surroundings. Located within the one building we have a state-of-the-art Lecture Theatre for our plenary sessions, classrooms for break-away groups and the Lecture Theatre Foyer for lunches, tea breaks and general socialising. Halls of Residence and Dining Room are a short (covered) walk away. Accommodation offers single and double rooms with shared or ensuite facilities. Registration material will be mailed to all members in August.

Janet Lambie

Lead a Workshop?

A workshop is an opportunity for a small group to explore the theme of this year's Conference from the point of view of the leader. In a workshop, as distinct from a lecture, all members contribute to the discussion and have a share in the outcome

A facilitator will work with the workshop leader to ensure the smooth running of the workshop and that all participants will get an opportunity to contribute.

- Have you any ideas on the theme "Inventing Reality", that interests you and that could be explored with others?
- Have you a question that would lend itself to consideration by a sympathetic group?
- Have you ideas that could perhaps be clarified and developed?

If so, then please consider offering to lead a workshop – or suggesting someone who could.

A workshop is not a high-powered

Number 25

March 1998

Announcing the 1998 Conference	1
The 1997 Conference in Retrospect	2
Will The Real Jesus Please Stand Up?	2
Left Brain v. Right Brain	2
Editorial	2
Letters to the Editor	3
Book Reviews	3
In The Beginning – Sin	4
Why Neo-Paganism Appeals	8
From the UK Sea of Faith Magazine	10
In Brief	10
Next Newsletter	10

presentation. It is **not** a lecture. The formal presentation of your material should take no more than 10 minutes.

The leader needs to have a clear focus on the topic and to be able to guide discussion for the benefit of all participants. If appropriate, the group could be asked to do some background reading before the workshop.

Reply to "Workshops", 82
Kinghorne St, Strathmore, Wellington
by April 11, 1988

The 1997 Conference in Retrospect

Some interesting information was elicited from our review of the conference evaluations. We have briefly highlighted some of the results for your information.

234 people registered for the 1997 conference; and 174 completed questionnaires were returned. Study of these shows:

- 91% gave the conference a high rating in terms of overall value (that pleased us)
- 58% indicated a high probability that they would attend the 1998 conference.
- Core groups (which were a new feature of the conference) were extremely popular, 67% giving them a high value rating. There were written comments such as "wonderful addition", and "best part".
- Comparing the breakdown of the respondents by age with the figures from last year shows little change - 58% being over the age of 61.
- a significant number of respondents made comments on the Saturday evening programme to the effect that Lloyd's lecture was scheduled too late in the evening and they were grateful that he provided written notes.

The results from these surveys are always extremely helpful to those involved in planning the next conference both in terms of the programme itself and the conference administration. A number of useful practical points have been identified from the 1997 survey and passed on to Janet Lambie and her team.

Thanks to all who completed the questionnaire - your time was not wasted - your efforts were very much appreciated by the steering committee.

Janet Davidson and Roy Griffith

Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

As this Newsletter went to press, a committee is at work with a view to bringing **The Jesus Seminar** to New Zealand.

"The Jesus Seminar was organized under the auspices of the Westar Institute to renew the quest of the historical Jesus and to report the results of its research to more than a handful of gospel specialists. At its inception in 1985, thirty scholars took up the challenge. Eventually more than two hundred professionally trained specialists, called Fellows, joined the group. The Seminar met twice a year to debate technical papers that had been prepared and circulated in advance. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Fellows of the Seminar voted, using colored beads to indicate the degree of authenticity of Jesus' words. Dropping colored beads into a box became the trademark of the Seminar and the brunt of attack for many elitist academic critics who deplored the public face of the Seminar."

from *The Five Gospels* by

Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover

Quotes attributed to Jesus in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, John and Thomas are color-coded according to the following:

- red: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.
- pink: Jesus probably said something like this.
- grey: Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own.
- black: Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition.

See also *Honest To Jesus* in the Book Review section of this Newsletter. Watch the press and your usual sources for developments.

Left Brain v. Right Brain

Every once-in-a-while an ongoing conversation ("thread") emerges among the participants of the SOFN Internet community. This one looks for a more balanced disposition in SOFNers:

Graham Rooth started the ball

rolling with this observation and question: "... I feel that the right hemisphere is a bit under-represented in our deliberations. I would like to hear something about what people actually do to nourish the spirit in their own lives, what they use for 'soulfood', whether they celebrated Christmas, and things like that."

Jillian Wilkinson set a lot of the tone that was to follow: "Link[ing] with the SOF has strengthened my increasing conviction that nourishing the spirit is not firstly a word based activity, but having, or wrestling with, the words clears the space for pure spiritual attentiveness, or silence, or anticipation, or peace. The intellectual debate seems to keep my argumentative streak under control, or satisfied."

I celebrated Christmas as a social, family opportunity to exchange expressions of goodwill on whatever level was appropriate, and that included going to the midnight service, singing carols, welcoming (and pretending to be) Santa Claus, being with my scattered family.

Amidst my enormous frustrations with and disappointments in the Church of England and its members and clergy, I still feel there is a special attitude to be had at a church service, when at its best all involved can shed their everyday personalities and become absorbed into a mystery.

Anthony Freeman agreed: "I certainly did [celebrate Christmas] - in a totally old-fashioned unreconstructed way: Nine Lessons and Carols; Midnight Mass; Turkey and Plum Duff; Crackers and paper hats; Family to stay; Three Christmas trees.... Thanks to a sympathetic local priest I was even able to celebrate mass on St John the Evangelist's Day."

For me the great value of the SOF tie approach is that it does allow me to feed the spirit without denying the intellect."

Ian Stubbs had a similar set of ideas: "I attend (and usually preside at) the eucharist in a small church on a poor and downtown estate in Oldham [U.K.] which has had a clergy vacancy for two years. I am dissatisfied with much in this service but I continue to be uplifted by the fact the 20 to 24 people gather every week to celebrate the continuing possibilities of hope, joy, love, care,

Editorial

Members of the **Sea of Faith Network** are sometimes accused of adopting "left-brain" approach to faith – a preference for the cerebral over the experiential. Not that we would unquestioningly accept that as a fault – after all someone has to provide an alternative to the schmaltzy fundamentalist electronic churches (whose voices, according to the book review by Alan Goss, are "empty and ranting") and to grenade-wielding fundamentalists of the middle east. (In passing, might it be a good idea for them to stop drinking black coffee and take up modest alcohol consumption, as a calming influence?)

At a number of points in this Newsletter the point is raised or the question asked: "what can we do to nourish the spirit?"

If our defection from mainstream religious practice has cut us off from lustily singing "All Things Bright and Beautiful" at the top of our lungs, have we lost something? If we can no longer utter a creed, "We Believe ...", then are we denied the sense of communal bonding that it provides? It does provide that, at least.

If the brand of humanism that we SOFers (some say "SOFTies", even "SOFists") tend to go for is myth-affirming and since we have discarded the older ecclesiastical trappings that turned the church into what Don Cupitt referred to as "a medieval theme park", it follows that we have to seek replacement myths.

But which? Surely not Reason or Science or Market Forces? In the item "Left Brain v. Right Brain" some SOFTies exchange views as to what nourishes their souls. Art, companionship, even participating in traditional religious practices – *but on their own terms*. Even neopaganism (see p8) is capable of nourishing our "personal myths". The SOF affirmation – the nearest to a creed that you'll get from us – says that we "draw freely upon our spiritual heritage without being bound by it".

We must feed both our rational minds (with facts) and our a-rational subconscious with myth and symbol.

And the whole person, what nourishes it? How do you nourish your spirit? How do you avoid spiritual junk food. "Letters To The Editor" close on May 1st.

Noel Cheer

prayer, justice etc. and to be inspired by the Jesus of history and faith. I love visiting art galleries. My idea of the church of the future would be an art gallery with a good coffee shop, newspapers and magazines where I could spend most of Sunday gazing, admiring, arguing, denouncing, being provoked, chatting, arguing, lounging, reading, sipping good coffee. I also like lounging in a deep bath with Ella Fitzgerald ...

Maxine Green wrote: "the whole point of religion ... for me ... is the transformation of myself and the community I am part of, and I suppose what I feel is that the academic approach to religion, although interesting, keeps it all at arm's length and does not challenge me to change. In fact it not only does not challenge – it diverts my thirst and interest. I think that unless SOF has space for this sort of exploration [of what "nourishes the spirit" in our own lives] it will become dry and sterile and remote... which is such a shame as it could provide a powerful resource for everyday folk."

Mary McEwen wrote, "I do nourish my soul to a certain extent with well performed traditional (Royal School of) Church Music. I also nourish my soul with secular classical music. Great church architecture and art (not much available in New Zealand) also gives me great joy, but so does tall New Zealand forest, dramatic landscapes, and the sight of many large mammals in the Serengeti National Park etc. All these things nourish my soul. This Christmas Eve I flew with my husband from Wellington via Sydney airport to Adelaide, to stay with our daughter, her husband and two little daughters. They nourish my soul. Flying on Christmas Eve was also very soul nourishing. Seeing people greeting loved ones at the airport, wearing Santa Hats sold to aid Child Cancer. It was all to do with love. When I was 21 I decided that my definition of god was the "e" in $e=mc^2$... nothing to do with love; just physics. I suppose that what I understand of Christianity is more about love. Jolly good ideas, spoilt often by the people who do things in the name of Christ."

reported by Noel Cheer

Subscribing

The Internet list administrator is

*The Sea of Faith Network
congratulates
Lloyd Heering
on the celebration of his
80th Birthday
on February 26,
1998*

Letters to the Editor

I do think there is something missing in the Newsletter, the human element; perhaps passion. I think you yourself recognise it with your call for Letters to the Editor. The element of debate is needed in an atmosphere of what I call Agreeing to Disagree, which is rarely practised.

As a child I was required to agree to agree or agree not to disagree. This was what the serpent managed to get Adam and Eve to do. Besides involving collusion and pretence I believe it is a recipe for war because it leaves resentment smouldering.

The recipe for peace is agreeing to disagree or Unity through Diversity. In my opinion it is one of several Universal Principles which is proclaimed throughout Scripture and is the essence of the Two Great Commandments (Luke 10:27) [In regard to the new logo] I applaud the "Pacific colours", and I realise a lot of work went into organising it, but I regret the omission of some distinctly NZ characteristic. What I heard at a recent "International Conference on Human Resources and Future Generations in Islands and Small States" was that small nations will survive globalism only if they have strong cultural and national identity.

I returned gravely concerned about N.Z. because I feel World War 3 has already begun and is not being fought with armaments but with something much more subtle. I realised, too, that Jesus worked from a base of strong personal identity which couldn't be defeated even in death and that was how he was able to allow people like the rich young ruler to be themselves. His life was totally in line with universal principles and that is where I think the answers are.

Lois Wells [abridged]

In The Beginning - Sin

Fred Marshall delivered this talk, initially to the Waikato group of SOFN and later to a church seminar. Because of its length, part will appear in this Newsletter and the remainder in the next.

The title refers to ... the Garden of Eden and the sin which caused us to be thrown out of that blissful state, inevitably and irrecoverably stained. What was this apple which our *tupuna ake* ate with such disastrous consequences? For the Middle Ages it was sex, which explains why women have had such a bad press in the traditional church beliefs, although how our prototypical ancestors were meant to do without it one wonders. The myth of the garden tends to be discounted these days and the notion of original sin is rejected out of hand; but if we look again, this ancient myth contains useful insights which we are just beginning to grasp.

Sin is associated with humanity from the very beginning. The term in its origin implies Guilt: "a transgression of the divine law and an offence against God; a violation (esp. wilful or deliberate) of some religious or moral principles" (*S.O.E.D.*)

It has three components:

1. a human attitude – guilt/shame
2. a 'picture' of God
3. a sense of morality i.e. the perception of right and wrong.

The apple was the "fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil"; i.e. it marks the threshold of our moral awareness. It defines a relationship with God – shame and guilt ("Who told you that you were naked?") which becomes permanent – original sin. It defines a notion of God: in the myth, a God who punishes.

The notion of sin is common to all the peoples of the Mediterranean from which our Pakeha [people of European cultural descent living in New Zealand – ed.] traditions spring. Mankind is essentially guilty *vis-à-vis* the gods who are more or less capricious, more or less moral, and who zap mortals on the slightest pretext. The best of them is probably Jahweh; there is only one of him and not a horde; he is righteous and his punishments are corrective and not destructive, like the Furies for example.

To rid themselves of sin/guilt the Mediterranean tribes adopted several strategies:

- The Israelites drew up a code of rules – the Torah – to avoid offending the deity; these rules had to be obeyed rigorously by all, in the interests of all, since one transgression would bring down the wrath of God on the whole people [as in] the example of Achan. The punishment for infringing the rules was severe. Achan and all his family were stoned and burnt. The bible tells us that when Joseph found that

Mary was pregnant he decided to put her away without making a scandal. If he had made her condition public, she would have been stoned to death and her baby with her.

- They offered propitiation to the god by way of sacrifice; human sacrifice was regular in the tribes that worshipped Baal. They threw their living babies into the burning belly of a brazen bull to propitiate the God. The story of Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac probably marks the end of human sacrifice in Israel and the ram, providentially caught by the horns in the branches of a desert bush, establishes the notion of an acceptable substitute. The Jews were still offering animal sacrifices of this kind in Jesus' day.

- They looked for a vicarious victim who would carry away the burden of sin – the scapegoat.

The Old Testament bequeaths us a mind-set:

- of a God who has the human attributes of a person-other-than-us, who behaves in human ways, who in the case of Jahweh judges and punishes,
- of a chronic state of human guilt and shame, and fear of the consequences
- of a ritual system built on that fear which demands the conformity of the individual to the decrees of a priestly caste and thus assures the political dominance of that caste.

This mind-set, focussed on wrong-doing, is essentially negative. As soon as you make rules, you set yourself up to break them; rules expose you to two dangers. Either you keep them and become self-righteous ("I thank you Lord that I am not as other men are") or you fail and the failure itself becomes an obsession. Sin is addictive.

What Jesus Did

- He changed the picture of God from King/Judge/Tyrant to Father (*Abba*) and thus took away the haunting fear of God.
- He did away with the "middle man", the priestly intermediaries ("whited sepulchres") and thus removed the abuse of religious authority.
- He put the rules in their place. Examples: healing on the Sabbath; the corn field; the woman caught in adultery.
- He rejected the bribing of God – propitiation. How could a Father God demand payment from his children for his favours? He took a whip to the sellers of animals and the money changers who were providing the sacrifices. And he substituted himself as the ultimate sacrifice – the

scapegoat – to remove the need of sacrifice.

- He changed the mindset of his people from transgression and punishment to the positive values of love and forgiveness. He provided simple symbolic acts to enable the transformation of his followers into the new mindset and to maintain this positive attitude: baptism and remembering him when they ate and drank together. He set about creating a new attitude – the pure heart – rather than new beliefs.

- The focal centre of his life was being open to the VOICE OF GOD. All his teaching was to open the minds of his hearers to that voice and remove obstacles to its perception. The coming of the holy spirit and the baptism of fire were the climax of his example and his teaching.

What The Church Has Done Since Then

The Church:

- set up a credo based on guilt, propitiation and redemption which turns God back into a tyrant, setting conditions for grace and making God's love, which Jesus taught as being for all, conditional on right belief;
- took the injunction "Each time you eat and drink, remember me" and turned it into the ritual of communion which should unite but which in fact divides the christian community
- hijacked the image of humanity as God's children by the notion of "adoption if you behave"
- used the threat of God's fearsome retribution to keep their followers in line

The Fathers compounded these distortions:

- Augustine added the neo-platonic notion of the baseness of the material world, giving sin the gloss of filth. Calvin and the Jansenists brought this human abasement to perfection.
- Successive Councils, from Constantine on, established the creeds, defining heresies and building a body of doctrine which gets greater and more absurd century by century, and tortured and burnt people who refused to accept it.
- Millennial apocalyptic fears exaggerated the hope of heaven and the terrors of hell, the consequence of sin, and these fears were exploited to strengthen the political clout of the Church and reinforce its temporal authority.

Our Age – The Third Turning Point

- We Christians [viz. "those of us who are" – ed.] have a concept of God which leaves out half the human race – the women –

and excludes as heathen the vast majority of the earth's peoples. We are faced with an edifice of doctrine which does not stand up to critical scrutiny – the Trinity. We have in particular a doctrine of propitiation which proposes the absurdity of a God who sacrifices himself to satisfy himself. We are unsure of the basis of our belief as scholarship throws doubt on the historicity of events in the New Testament and regards the records as assertions which advance a particular viewpoint rather than as a historical record. Pictures of God no longer satisfy us wholly. "God the all-terrible king who ordainest." God has gone beyond the image. Every image reduces God to the comprehensible and distorts the reality. Some deny that God even exists.

Before Jesus there was a strand of prophecy developing which emphasised purity of life rather than ritual observance; which imaged God as tender – a husband longing for a wayward wife, a father lamenting his lost children.

It was Jesus who gave this movement the momentum to change the perspective. In the same way throughout the history of the Christian Church there have been many who have protested the distortion of the simple message of love and mutual forgiveness; some of them were burnt for their concern. But it is only in our age that the contradiction between the teaching of the Church and the deep significance of the life of Jesus has become generally obvious. And what are we to do about it? Are we to throw over beliefs which are manifestly untenable and with them the Church itself which has been the civilising force of the Western world, the voice of God to us for 2,000 years; to throw out the whole notion of God? Or do we look to change the mindset again and renew the Body of Christ for the next age?

The Sea of Faith movement is a loose grouping of people world wide who wish to remain within the fabric of the Church [some do – ed.] but reject (some more, some less of) the body of doctrine that makes up the credo of one sect or another. They describe themselves as "exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation" searching for ways to express the mindset of our time. They have helped me clarify my own perspective, particularly in the matter of sin and guilt.

I suggest therefore that we adopt the same perspective, i.e. go back to the garden; and look at what happened there from outside as it were, without a commitment to the traditional interpretation.

The myth of the Garden of Eden marks the decisive moment when we, the human race, became self-aware and separated ourselves definitively from the other animal species. A herd of antelope graze

in peace in the company of their predators, the lions. Their only thought is the next blade of grass, the next drink of water. When the lions get hungry there is a frantic burst of activity, adrenalin fired and terror driven, the slowest is killed, and the herd sets about grazing again, in complete tranquillity. They live in a continuous present, meeting each eventuality with the instinctive response triggered by their genes, moving sunrise by sunrise towards their last sunset, completely unaware of their passage through time. This is the Garden-of-Eden state.

We became aware! Our big brains reached out to understand the world around us; we invented language and then writing and with that created history, we mastered the soil, we domesticated the animals, we tracked the stars in their passage, we mastered fire, we made iron, we split the atom, we are splitting the living cell, we mastered the air, we are mastering space. The only limit to our mastery is our imagination. What we can imagine, we can do. What a wonderful gift. But at what a cost! "To the woman he said: 'I will multiply your pains in child-bearing, you shall give birth to your children in pain'. To the man he said: 'Accursed be the soil because of you. With suffering shall you get your food from it.'"

The apple of awareness which we so rashly and so inevitably plucked, cast us out of the timeless existence of the animals. In the morning we remembered the predators of the evening before, we remembered from day to day the hardships of famine and thirst, we remembered the pain of child-birth, we knew that we were born and that we would die. Awareness took away from us the tranquil nirvana of the animals and replaced it with fear. We have been picking the apple of knowledge ever since; and every new discovery brings with it consequences we tremble over: fire; gun-powder; atomic fission and fusion; genetic manipulation. Every discovery means progress and danger, as it has since the day the woman took the apple and gave it to her husband.

You will remember that it was the fruit of the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil which Eve picked, and gave to Adam. Moral awareness, that is to say the awareness of the other person as another self and the mutual obligations that bind us to each other, "do to others as you would have them do to you" is an essential component of this wonderful awareness.

Another essential component is our relationship with God. Both of these derive from a significant uniquely human characteristic: the ability to imagine the ideal and compare it with the actual: What I did, as opposed to what I might have done. These components working together produce

inevitably the mindset of sin. We were set up for it from the outset.

Set Up To Sin

Life was hard for our ancestors. Drought and famine, fire and flood, lightning, earthquakes, volcanoes, plague and pestilence – so many inflictions of a cruel and capricious universe. In our search for understanding, how were they to be explained? In the traditions from which the European peoples have sprung mankind identified the unknown with the divine. The hail which flattened your crops, or the sickness which afflicted your children came from God or the Gods. You can see in the Genesis story the attribution of responsibility for these hardships to God, as a punishment for eating that blessed apple. The Gods were invented to explain the inexplicable.

Fear peopled the universe with Gods of our making whom we set out to serve.

Relative to the Gods we were powerless; however good we were, whatever bribes we offered, the hail and the earthquake, the drought and the flood still came. The book of Job reflects that perception. The only human attitude possible was for us, like him, to sit on the dung-heap and scrape our boils with a bit of a broken pot: to grovel in abasement before the Lord. These Gods reflect our own psyche and the nature of our fears. Baal was cruel and capricious, the mirror of the sado-masochistic tendencies buried in us; the Greek Pantheon was as self-centred and untrustworthy as the people who worshipped them; the Jahweh of the Israelites was rigorously righteous, a judge to punish wrong-doing. The view of the Sea of Faith is right, up to a point, when it proposes that religion is a human invention, and that the "God" we worship is made in our own image.

This fear of the unknown was compounded by that other essential ability – to measure the actual against the ideal. Measured against the Gods, humans are always inferior and powerless. Measured against what we know to be ideal, our efforts are always imperfect. Paul sums it up: "The good that we would we do not, and the evil that we would not, that we do." (Rom 7:19) or as the Jerusalem Bible puts it: "though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want." (*hoseiljmata, paraptvmata* – "falling aside", *Hamartia*). In a world of ignorance and fear, we are condemned inevitably to this perspective.

The perception of sin is a uniquely human attribute. We have always regarded it as bad and tried to be rid of it as the rules and the sacrifices we looked at in the first section show. But have we misunderstood its significance?

[To be concluded in the next Newsletter]

Patti Whaley of SOFN (UK). The list is not moderated; that is, she does not approve either the subscribers or the specific messages on the list; but as she wants the list to remain private, people must e-mail her (at 101335.3561@compuserve.com) to find out the address for the list.

Book Reviews

Vashti's Voices

Vashti's Voices: A journal exploring theologies for a just future (Review of No.2/1 Spring 1997 - Margins and Thresholds) by Liz Robinson.

I don't think I'm the right person to be reviewing this publication – given that only about one set of research notes on one page attracted my reading attention. This journal builds on the style of *Vashti's Voice*, [the extra "s" makes a difference – ed] a feminist theology journal published between 1978 and 1991. It aims to "provide a forum for ideas, dialogue, creative expression and research ... foster the ongoing development of theologies, particularly feminist theologies ... " There is no doubt that this widely-contributed to edition, and I hope the editions to come, will be of interest and comfort to those within the Christian churches and communities, even to those who consider themselves unavoidably Christian. But somehow the language of the variety of essays, poems and thoughts seems to me something I have left behind and don't wish to worry at like a bitch with a bone.

Searching, sharing, struggling, questioning, declaring awareness, listening, being challenged, feeling ambivalence – an array of common enough religious jargon within an array of topics – from a meeting of religious women in India to a poem titled "Waiting for God"; or a soul-searching essay about being at St John's College; to book reviews about Christian women. Special praise should go to the five women editors for the number of contributions. And the fact that more Catholic women are now entering the wider Christian feminist scene is also a plus.

To all those who want to read about the Christian journeys of women, and I suspect that might be me occasionally,

then do subscribe. I don't think Christian voices will necessarily be the only ones printed therein. A bit less introspection, and broader perspectives on what feminism is, from contributors who are beating a totally different path could be attractively healthy and appreciated. . .

. . . it's not that the writing in this edition is smug or particularly unoriginal. It's just that I want to read something that says "this matters" to me. See if it matters to you.

Published by and purchased from Women's Resource Centre, Private Bag 11903, Ellerslie, Auckland. \$22 for one year's subscription

Liz Robinson

Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Church went wrong and what to do about it

by John Cobb, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, reviewed by Lloyd Geering

For many years John Cobb has taught at the Graduate School of Theology at Claremont, Los Angeles and is a leading exponent of process theology. He continues to identify with the Methodist Church but describes himself as a troubled member of that **mainline** church, which he says must now be called the **oldline** church, as a result of which it is fast becoming the **sideline** church.

After diagnosing the spiritual sickness of the church as a condition of lukewarmness and lack of conviction he looks for the reasons which have caused it. He describes two proposals for responding to it: renewal and transformation. He believes both are necessary but favours the second.

He finds, however, that "the church has lost the ability to think. Unless it recognises its healthy survival depends

"The language of fundamentalism is empty and ranting, the language of liberal religion is soothing but empty waffle. Religious language has collapsed."

see "After All"

Page 6

on the recovery and exercise of that ability and acts on that recognition, talk of either renewal or transformation is idle".

It is good to see such a responsible and well known scholar turning attention to the problem facing the church; and when one remembers that the decline in church attendance in USA is not yet nearly so great as it is in New Zealand, this is even more remarkable.

On the other hand, this fact may prevent Cobb from seeing that his diagnosis of cultural changes may not have gone deep enough and his suggestions may not yet be radical enough. This booklet of 110 pages should be seen as a working paper which raises the issues to be discussed rather than as a blueprint of the answers. It is a tragedy that in New Zealand, where the predicament of the churches is probably worse than that in the USA, church leaders do not even get as far as Cobb in acknowledging the situation.

Lloyd Geering

After All

This book, by Don Cupitt (SCM Press, 1994) was reviewed by Lloyd Geering in Newsletter 6, in March 1994. This review is by Alan Goss:

In this mind-stretching book, Don Cupitt put forward a view of life that fits the times we live in. He wants to describe as truthfully and as naturalistically as he can, the world, ourselves and our language. In other words, a natural theology and a natural religion.

By the end of the nineteenth century, metaphysics and systematic theology were dead in the water. We now need to come to terms with the cosmic story offered by modern science allied to a vision of the world that reduces everything to the movement of cultural signs, especially language. The old ideas about God, the soul, life after death ... are no longer tenable. The church is fighting a desperate rear-guard action in defense of tradition against modernity and, rather ironically, clings to power by asking people to believe in absurdities. (True maybe, but do I not detect a trace of acid and overkill here?) The language of fundamentalism is empty and ranting, the language of liberal religion is soothing but empty waffle. Religious language has collapsed. So we live in a post-modern, post-christian age when

people can live without ideology, in which there are not two worlds but only one, this world. There is no longer a super-Being "out there". Everything that lives is holy. We want a new kind of Kingdom religion which is grown up, open air, free moving. Jesus can therefore be seen as a prophet of the post-Christian age.

In his major chapter, "How It Is", Cupitt attempts to harmonize the three worlds of our experience – the world of events (objective), the world of self (subjective) and the world of language. This he does in naturalistic terms:

Language: all our thinking is transacted in linguistic and other signs. The Big Bang and the Universe itself, are conjured up only by language and can appear to us only within language. The world, like our brain, is a seething cauldron of language.

The Universe: Pictured as an immense slow-motion explosion, scattering radiation and tiny particles of energy across space and time.

Life-In-This-World: Symbolised by a fountain. In speaking of the world as a flux of language-formed events we call up a picture of a constant uprush of energies that arch upwards, spread, scatter, are borne away and are lost. The fountain is a symbol of life's transparency and passing away, its rush into oblivion, and ceaseless renewal. It flows in the same direction all the time, but its not going anywhere, has no general long-term goal towards which events are orchestrated. A fountain is also a symbol of healing and refreshment, blissful to contemplate. It moves so fast, its still; its so transient its eternal.

Mystery: Apart from the flux of language-formed events there is nothing else, nothing between the lines, nothing mysterious. What appears is what there is.

Transcendence: In place of the old mysterious transcendent order ... we will acknowledge that language and interpretation is endless, there will always be scope for surprise and innovation. We believe in art, and in the creative religious imagination. (In a later book, *After God*, [reviewed in Newsletter 24], Cupitt acknowledges an unseen intelligible world, or spirit world, about us and within us. It is the world of words and other symbols.

"The supernatural world of religion turns out all along to have been in various ways a mythical representation of the truly magical world of linguistic meaning.")

Relationships: There are preachers who idealize straightness, transparency and truth-telling in human relationships. They are mistaken. Unless people are a little prickly they disappear. Life requires a touch of misunderstanding, conflict of interpretations, teasing, malice, banter, irony and difference. Love is a very particular way of being irritated or stirred by someone. Sameness is death. Otherness is life.

Death: The moment of death may be viewed as a state of total relaxation and therefore of final and snuffed-out impersonal bliss. It can therefore be regarded as something to be looked forward to.

Cupitt concludes with a chapter on active religion – trying to enhance the beauty of the world; and contemplative religion – a sort of ecstatic melting into and being part of the world.

This book, like most of Cupitt's works, is no casual read. His creative mind and poetic instincts, along with some obvious frustrations, are always running ahead of his pen; but its well worth the effort trying to catch up.

Alan Goss

Mysticism After Modernity

by Don Cupitt, Blackwell, 1998
reviewed by Lloyd Geering

When I first read a book by Don Cupitt (I think it was *Christ and the Hiddenness of God*, it was published in 1971 but I read it in 1975) I was interested but not wholly absorbed by it. I thought he was moving in the right direction but had not gone far enough. But his *Taking Leave of God* in 1980 I found very exciting. I thought it was spot on; and it was this one which led me to go and visit him personally. Since then I have read every book of his with great interest though occasionally there were a few bits which I found opaque.

This latest book puzzles me the most, not because I disagree with it but because I am not sure if I have understood it very well. I have the feeling that Don has been moving so fast in his

thinking that I need a little time to catch up and that I may appreciate it much more in ten years time, if I am still able to read it then.

This book argues that the great mystics (about whom I know all too little), if properly understood, have much to teach us on how to live in this post-modern age when all the old certainties have gone.

The mystics, particularly within the Christian tradition, were always on the margins of their culture. Don sees them as the forerunners of today's radical theology. (We should remember that "Taking Leave of God" is a quote from the mediaeval mystic Meister Eckhart).

Don thinks it is a mistake to assume that the mystics first had mystical experiences and that afterwards they attempted to put this into words. Rather it was the other way round; it was through their writing that they reached their experience. "A person 'has a religious experience' when she is able through religious imagery or ritual to 'get herself together', and to experience the harmonisation and reconciliation of the various forces bearing upon her and within her".

This not an easy book to read, but there are some brilliant flashes of insight in it. I shall certainly go back to it.

Lloyd Geering

Honest to Jesus

By Robert W. Funk, published by HarperSanFrancisco. 1996; The following is a promotional item from the publishers.

Speaking out on the historical Jesus for the first time, the founder of the pioneering Jesus Seminar launches a landmark new investigation into who Jesus really was. With brilliant insight, Robert Funk reveals how Jesus was transformed from iconoclast to icon, and outlines a daring, tradition-shattering agenda for freeing Jesus from the constraints of orthodoxy and reinventing Christianity for the coming era.

"I am inclined to the view that Jesus caught a glimpse of what the world is really like when you look at it with God's eyes. He endeavored to pass that glimpse along in short stories we call parables and in subversive proverbs we call

Why Neo-Paganism Appeals

"... personal myths explain one's world to oneself, guide personal development, provide social direction and address spiritual longings. They organise one's sense of reality and guide one's actions." ... "The reemergence of Paganism today administers to the symbolic poverty of our times by reactivating those centres of the mythological imagination in the receptive individual. The old legends are retold, nurturance is received once more from romance, echoes of mystery are heard anew and reassurance is provided by ritual action, symbols of place and great Nature's seasonal round."

Kenneth Rees
in *Paganism Today*
pub. Thorsons (HarperCollins)

aphorisms. But he did not spell out what he meant. I have a glimpse of the real Jesus stealing a peek at God's domain. My glimpse is informed by, but bypasses, the Jesus of the Gospels – the Christ superimposed by the evangelists on their own glimpse of the real Jesus... I am convinced that the New Testament conceals the real Jesus as frequently as it reveals him."

from the Introduction

In *Honest to Jesus*, Robert Funk, one of the preeminent biblical scholars of our time, embarks on a radical investigation into the transformation of Jesus, the social rebel and iconoclast, into Jesus, the religious icon.

Founder of the Jesus Seminar: the group of writers, philosophers, and theologians spearheading new research into the historical Jesus and the authenticity of the gospels – Funk has never before articulated his own bold and fearless vision of who Jesus truly was and how his legacy should be approached by the modern world.

Fortright, penetrating, and as radical as the mysterious figure it investigates, *Honest to Jesus* is a new

classic in the debate over the search for the real Jesus and its implications for modern Christianity.

Earth Currents, The Struggle for the World's Soul

by Howard A. Snyder Abingdon Press, 1995 reviewed by Lloyd Geering

I had not heard of this book until I picked it up last year in Blackwells at Oxford; many American books never seem to reach New Zealand.

The author, an academic in Ohio, is a liberally minded Christian and is probably a Methodist. He does reveal from time to time a more conservative background, particularly in his use of the Bible. He has written several books and this arises from his recent opportunity to travel to some 13 countries in 6 continents.

Snyder here analyses in a very readable way the current human predicament. The book has three parts. In the first he examines the question of where the world is currently going and he discerns and discusses some eight trends: an emerging global culture, an emerging world economy, the feminist revolution, the environmental risk, the new genetics and physics, artificial intelligence, America's current decline, the possible coming clash of civilisations.

Then he looks at the prevailing world views: the current dominance of economics, the significance of quantum theory, the Gaia hypothesis, the theistic view of the universe, determinism and blind fate, and post-modernism as the end of all world views.

Finally Snyder looks briefly at five possible scenarios of the world's future: environmental disaster, friendly fascism, Armageddon, nuclear terrorism, world spiritual renewal. He goes

.....
And Jesus said unto them,
"And whom do you say that I am?"
They replied,
"You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the ontological foundation of the context of our very selfhood revealed."
And Jesus replied,
"What?"
.....

(found on the Internet)

on to expound what he sees as the only adequate response to the current challenges.

What is attractive about this book is that it reflects very wide reading, is very comprehensive in its scope, is fairly realistic about the present global situation and is genuinely attempting to look for a worthwhile outcome. One may not agree with all he says and I believe he assumes and finally promotes far too much of the traditional Christian teaching, which he does not look at with sufficient criticism. Yet it is an interesting book, which alerts the reader to ideas and books which may have been previously unknown.

Lloyd Geering

God's Own Green Paradise – New Zealand Churches and the Environment

H.H. Miskotte, pub. Shaker Publishing B.V. St. Maartenlaan 26, 6221 AX Maastricht, The Netherlands (www.shaker.nl), reviewed by Rinny Westra.

In 1993, Mans Miskotte, Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Amsterdam, spent six months in New Zealand researching the relations between "mainstream" N.Z. churches (Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist) and the environmental movement. He did this by conducting scores of interviews with church members, ministers, priests, and theologians, while at the same time travelling through and experiencing the full impact of N.Z.'s magnificent landscape and environment. The results of his research are gathered up in this book.

The book is, in my opinion, a "must" for all N.Z. church people, whether environmentally-inclined or not. It presents the view of an "outsider" – and yet an outsider who met and conversed with numerous ordinary kiwis both inside and outside the churches. It reflects us back to ourselves – both positively and critically, and raises important questions not just about our environmental commitments but also about our theology and our theological training.

Some interesting questions emerge from his research:

1. What are the theological perspectives that we bring to our environmental concerns?

2. While some (especially in the Anglican Church), operate from a Christ-centred and incarnational perspective, much theological reflection on the environment seems to start from an abstract philosophical approach and then tries to fit biblical insights into that. Should it not be the other way around?

3. Miskotte writes of "a severe underestimation of the importance of the Old Testament for all Christian theology" (p.186) in N.Z.

4. Is our theological training sufficient to enable students to come to grips with a "theology of nature"?

5. What about the role of Maori spirituality ... how do we interpret the acknowledgement of Tane Mahuta, Tangaroa, and Papatuanuku by Maori Church people?

Miskotte has written this book in English, which is not his first language. That is an amazing thing to do for someone who thinks in Dutch. The result is "Dutch English" – and one needs to keep that in mind as one reads the book. But it is not a difficult book to read – in fact its "Dutchness" makes it all the more authentic.

The book is a sympathetic study of where the N.Z. churches are at in relation to the environment – and we do well to receive this as an unsolicited gift and challenge as we prepare to move into the third millennium.

Rinny Westra [abridged]

Best Religious Books of 1997

Amazon.com is based in the United States and sells books over the World Wide Web. The following is, in the opinion of their Philosophy and Religion editor Brian Bruya, the top ten religious books of 1997.

1. *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple* by James P. Carse. In spare but evocative language, the acclaimed author of

Breakfast at the Victory conjures up a Jesus with a still presence of mind who is a pool of wisdom for his frenetic and hostile world. James Carse dares to tell a new story of Jesus that is as right for our times as the original gospels were for theirs.

2. *Mother Teresa: 1910-1997: Beyond the Image* by Anne Sebba. The author takes a uniquely balanced approach to the phenomenon of Mother Teresa, praising her for the immense good that she accomplished, but also taking her to task for her deficiencies.

3. *Hallowed Ground: Rediscovering Our Spiritual Roots* by Stephen Burgard. The author, a journalist with the Los Angeles Times, shows how churches can cooperate to make concrete changes in their communities while avoiding the dogmatic confrontations that have marked politics on the national level.

4. *Minyan: Ten Principles for Living a Life of Integrity* by Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro. He went in search of Zen Judaism and found it in Hasidic literature. In writings that speak of the unity of self, God, and the world, he found a deeply spiritual tradition hidden within Judaism, for which many Jews have gone looking elsewhere.

5. *Gospel Truth: The New Image of Jesus Emerging from Science and History, and Why It Matters* by Russell Shorto. The author does a crackerjack job of summing up the latest research on the historical Jesus.

Without taking sides, as most other books in this vein do, Shorto draws a fascinating picture of Jesus the man by approaching the topic from all available angles.

6. *Man of the Century: The Life and Times of Pope John Paul II* by Jonathan Kwitny. Award-winning investigative reporter Jonathan Kwitny has drawn a detailed portrait of the Pope that reveals a man of momentous

significance, warts and all.

7. *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* by Bruce Bawer. In page after page, Bruce Bawer reveals a so-called fundamentalist movement that readily displays a blatant disregard for the most salient message of the Gospels: selfless love and service to all.

8. *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* by Pema Chodron. Much like Zen, Pema Chodron's interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism takes the form of a nontheistic spiritualism. This head of a Tibetan monastery in Canada outlines some relevant and deceptively profound terms of Tibetan Buddhism that have everything to do with modern issues in life. [see also "Accepting Futility" in Newsletter 24 – ed.]

9. *Buddhism Without Beliefs* by Stephen Batchelor. The author argues that what makes Buddhism different from most religions is that the wisdom is independent of the theology and is not informative to believers only, but to everyone.

10. *Storming Heaven's Gate: An Anthology of Spiritual Writings by Women* by Amber Coverdale Sumrall and Patrice Vecchion, editors. Poems and short essays, such as Mary Karr's quest for a church in which her son could, in his words, "see if God's there" and Nancy Mair's coming to understand charity and mercy at the soup kitchen Casa Maria, all sparkle with the sincerity of each writer's search for spiritual fulfillment

For more information check out their website at: www.amazon.com

SATRS Web Site

The St. Andrew's Trust for The Study of Religion and Society (Wellington) now has a website. On it you will find a full catalogue of books and audio tapes by Geering, Spong, Cupitt *et al.*

"Inventing Reality" – A Primer

Self: "Sartre's view is that we define ourselves by what we do, that human beings have no essence, but create themselves by their actions. Merleau-Ponty expresses the same idea as, "You are what you do to others." Carol Ochs, *Behind The Sex of God*, p39

God: "'God' is a symbol that gathers up into itself and focusses for us all those cosmic forces working toward the fully humane existence for which we long." Gordon Kaufman *The Theological Imagination, Constructing the Concept of God* p50

You'll find it at:

www.futuresgroup.org.nz/satrs.html

From the UK SOF Magazine

• "I blame the Victorians for turning the Church into a medieval theme park." *Don Cupitt.*

• "A Christian non-realist like me may often find himself dropping back into the old type of God-consciousness, praying or worshipping because he wants to or because it helps. And why not? I actually think I love God more now that I know God is voluntary ..." *Don Cupitt*

• "... given the attrition rate of earlier 'religious humanist' organisations, what chance does SOF have of survival? [He then traces the history and, in most cases, demise, of these organisations]. "Don Cupitt urges the need for a history of 'humanism' to help us 'get really clear about just what version of religious humanism we are commending, and why.'" "Suffice it to say that SOF humanism would be not only better-disposed towards the poetry of religious tradition and its inspirational potential, but also critical of the philosophical realism of the older humanism - its apparent assumption of the objectivity of Reason or Rationality or Science, its implicit belief in some real foundational essence of human nature." *David Boulton*, author of *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist*.

• "It seems to me that religious faith is one of the few activities that we have created that actually celebrates the human." *Jude Bullock*, former Catholic priest.

• "Religions do not create cosmologies, they insert themselves into the prevailing cosmology of the time." *Jude Bullock.*

• "The creeds works by binding the community together, not by uttering eternally true propositions ... like [the crowd] singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" at a football match." *Jude Bullock*

• "Religious symbolism is not some superstitious hang-over from a bye-gone age but a radical means of recreating ourselves with love and passion for each other and for life itself." *Jude Bullock*

The UK *Sea of Faith Magazine*,

published quarterly, contains well-thought-out articles by a variety of people and will provide you with stimulating reading in addition to our own Newsletter. Subscribers outside of the UK should send eleven pounds sterling to: **Ronald Pearse, 15 Burton Street, Loughborough LE11 2DT, UK**

In Brief

Middle East Tour

Lloyd Geering writes:

"There are still a few places free on the 1998 Holy Land Tour. But any one interested would need to contact the organisers as soon as possible. This will be the fifth tour which Lloyd Geering has conducted to the Middle East but it will also be the last. This one starts with two days in Lebanon, before moving through Syria, Israel and Jordan visiting all the most important sites, before returning to London. It leaves Auckland on April 29, returning to London on May 24. Tour members have the choice of staying in Europe or returning home. The cost, which covers absolutely everything except lunches, is \$7940.

Contact Global Encounters, 28 Forest Road, Raumati South. Phone: 04-299-5900. Fax: 04-299-5205. e-mail: ken@global.kp.planet.gen.nz

1998 UK conference

The 1998 (22-24 July) UK SOFN conference (their 11th) will be titled "What on Earth is Spirituality?" and will tackle head-on the question of what "spirituality" means in a non-real context. The speakers will be Don Cupitt; Robert Ashby of the British Humanist Association, and Catholic writer-priest Diarmuid O'Murchu.

A SOF by any other name?

The UK Steering Committee is accepting correspondence of whether the name of the Network is appropriate. What are your thoughts? Send them to the editor of this Newsletter.

Science and the Spiritual Quest

More than twenty-five eminent cosmologists, physicists, biologists and computer scientists are set to converge on the University of California at Berkeley, June 7 to 10, 1998 for the Science and the Spiritual Quest

Conference.

This conference is designed to explore the challenges and possibilities scientists face in their relationship between science and religion.

Topics will include "Does Science Offer Evidence of a Transcendent Reality and Purpose?" "Science & Morality: Is There a Bridge?" "When Scientists Speak: Exploring the Frontiers of Science & Spirituality", "The Distinctiveness of Being Human", "Reductionism vs. Holism: Multiple Models of the Spiritual Quest."

The public is invited to attend the four-day conference. For more information, visit the web site at www.SSQ.net or contact Silas Deane or Joelle Polisky 00-1-615-320-7532

Next Newsletter: June

Copy deadline is **May 1st**. To offer a contribution, send a floppy disk or manuscript to Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay or e-mail to noel.cheer@ibm.net

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ)

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

The Sea of Faith Network itself has no creed. It draws its members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

It publishes a regular newsletter, assists in setting up of local discussion groups, and holds an annual conference. The WWW home page is at www.futuresgroup.org.nz

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the Membership Secretary, Roy Griffith, 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore Park, Wellington, Phone 04-388-1885.

To offer a comment on any material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact the Editor, Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, Phone 04-236-7533, Fax 04-236-7534, noel.cheer@ibm.net